Back to the Future, or Forward?
Hong Kong Design, Image,
and Branding
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Introduction

It is now more than ten years since Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of mainland China. Hong Kong was and is particular in its multiple identities as a British colony, a Chinese territory, and a global city; yet its heterogeneity is increasingly typical of the twenty-first-century urban experience. Consideration of design in the global context in relation to Hong Kong raises a number of issues. The most obvious and potentially the most interesting is the complexity of Hong Kong design's emerging and simultaneous relationship with at least two cultural contexts. One is the international culture of globalization and global products (which has underpinned Hong Kong's economy), and the other the local culture of Hong Kong itself and that of greater China and Asia which, given Hong Kong's colonial history, takes a distinct form. Yet to speak of a bifurcation of cultures (the old cliché of "East meets West") is too simplistic and essentialist to address Hong Kong and its recent history.

While internationally the dominant mode of universal global and design culture is still predominantly Western (and largely American), it has become more nuanced as Asia has become more influential as the world hub of manufacturing; and as locally and regionally inspired design from Asia penetrates international markets. Also, globally, new configurations are replacing the former dominance of the national. We can, for example, distinguish Catalan from Spanish design (see, for example, Viviana Narotzky's paper, page 62) and, of course, Scandinavian design successfully applies as a way of identifying a wide range of design qualities and values, where reference to the component nations would not. We also know that major global brands are highly complex by virtue of their production, consumption, and design. If, at this point in history, these brands still serve to represent the international dominance of Western culture and lifestyle, the design and conception of products themselves are beginning to shift closer to the manufacturing centers in Asia.

The issue of referring to at least two cultures simultaneously comprises the contemporary Asian experience. It can be seen as both a blessing and a curse. While it certainly offers opportunities for

manufacturers seeking to attract more diverse and wide-ranging consumer markets, it does not necessarily lead to the dissemination of cultural experiences through design, but to its opposite, the reinforcement of externally devised cultural stereotypes. Still, for designers in Asia who are not content merely to produce Western designs (that is where Western culture, values, and representation predominate), the identification of qualities and characteristics local to Asian cultures and their translation into product and image forms can enable experiments that bring about new, hybrid design identities. As the work of some designers is beginning to indicate, design can become a means of embodying or giving form to a new cultural identity—new in the sense that the identity draws upon the local and the global, and also new in the sense that the complex cultural *identity sought in or through design does not yet exist*. Design, after all, can function at that critical pivot between the cultural and the commercial. The task, therefore, is giving "expression" to something that already exists in a culture or, more interestingly, about designing as a way of unveiling a putative and very complex identity, which also might have more global resonances. Across Asia today, these issues are being played out in different ways in design. Certainly, it is apparent where design is revitalizing generic craft processes; for example, in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and the Philippines; or with the redesign of products related to particular local and cultural practices such as food and eating.

This paper considers the role of a "cultural" based design in the formation of brand images and products relative to Hong Kong, one of the first Asian locations after Japan to address this task. The focus on the 1990s, the post-colonial decade which witnessed the "handover" of sovereignty in 1997 from Britain to China, was a time the financial, manufacturing, trading, and social stability; and the very identity of Hong Kong and its people was in question.

Background

A product of British imperial trading interests, and occupied after World War II largely by a refugee population (following the Communist takeover of mainland China in 1949), Hong Kong stands as one of the key exemplars of the rise of Asian economic power. Since the late-eighteenth century, the Pearl River Delta had been the center of China's export trade. Local techniques, material, and labor were used to mass-produce goods for the world.[1] Wonderful conceits resulted, particularly the Chinoiserie designs made in the delta for export to Europe. Adaptation and export orientation already were the models when Hong Kong began to establish its own manufacturing in the late nineteenth century, albeit under colonial dominance.

Hong Kong's peculiar geographical and political positioning between East and West has facilitated its role as an entrepôt, and underpinned its economy, but also created a crisis of identity. Being neither wholly Chinese, but clearly also not non-Chinese, was highly

problematic for local people who found it hard to define what Hong Kong is, or what it means to be a Hong Kong person. This question over the enclave's identity became a critical issue in the runup to the 1997 handover when Hong Kong, caught as it was between colonialism and the global economy on one side, and a broken legacy of Chinese culture on the other, became increasingly uncertain about its identity and also its future.

As it looked forward, Hong Kong needed to be something more than a bridge between China and the rest of the world: the place where "East meets West" and where all the resulting cultural tensions are played out. In the 1990s, there were increasing attempts to develop an identity representative of post-colonial Hong Kong.[2] This was evident in the arts, in popular culture, in politics (with the gaining in strength of the local Democratic Party), and also in design. The position of design as a point of local-global interface was not without precedent. History explains the colony's situation in the 1990s, and provides context for the potential and effectiveness of design in giving expression to a new cultural identity in the global marketplace.

The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, followed by the Tiananmen incident of June 1989, confirmed a number of fears that the Hong Kong way of life, originating from its mixture of colonialism and democracy, was in danger of disappearing. The impending handover of sovereignty in June 1997 focused the colony's attention inwards and increased concerns over its imminent disappearance. In considering Hong Kong at the point of its handover, Ackbar Abbas has quoted Walter Benjamin's statement: "Anything about which one knows that one soon will not have it around becomes an image." Abbas observed in Hong Kong a change in the status of culture ("…from reverse hallucination, which sees only desert, to a culture of disappearance, whose appearance is posited on the imminence of its disappearance.[3]")The "imminence of the disappearance" post-1984, that is the disappearance of characteristic but often unrecognized aspects of Hong Kong's vulnerable identity, was echoed in divergent design trends. One, impelled by the economic imperatives of Hong Kong was in OEM (Original Equipment Manufacture), where manufacturers made export products for overseas customer companies that usually supplied the designs, was the existing direction "toward the expression of pure Western themes,"[4] that is design predicated entirely on market considerations.

Western themes underpinned the development of Hong Kong's manufacturing base, founded on OEM, which had its roots in manufacturing in the Pearl River Delta in the eighteenth century, characterized by "a labor-intensive system of serial or mass production … a strong export orientation; and … a process of adaptive design."[5] The process created no opportunity for the origination and development of design locally for, in effect, the

local market did not exist: the customers were overseas and they, in turn, set the "modern" taste locally. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, in an attempt to develop Hong Kong design and manufacturing, government intervention promoted, sponsored, and defined design education and dominated the discourse of Hong Kong "modernity" and "Chineseness." Imported modern, Western style designs were manufactured for expanding overseas export markets. In the process, "an Orientalist discourse was invented which equated Chinese design with fussy detailing and neo-Chinoiserie, and Hong Kong modern design with simulacra of current Western practice."[6]

The move to ODM (Original Design Manufacturing) and then OBM (Original Brand Manufacturing) in the 1990s as an "upgrading" of the OEM system, offered new potential for change. Old-style OEM companies moved towards higher value production by developing their own brands. For example, Fang Brothers, a clothing manufacturer, developed the fashion label "Episode." Others including the battery and electric products manufacturer Gold Peak and the electronics company Johnson Electrics generated their own designs, often resold under another label.[7] This change reflected a new self-confidence by companies in using original design, but the overarching style and image were Western and global rather than reflecting any particularity of Hong Kong, other than their contribution to the Hong Kong economy.

The next section provides a brief overview of the development of a Hong Kong design identity which was evident initially in graphic design, where the earliest designs were derived from Hong Kong/Chinese culture. Case studies from three companies; Vivienne Tam, Shanghai Tang, and G.O.D.; that have developed brand images based around a Hong Kong/Chinese cultural identity are presented. The final section considers the emergence of a new subjectivity in Hong Kong design.

Cross-cultural Graphic Design

Since the early twentieth century, graphic design in Hong Kong had attempted to synthesize local/Chinese culture with foreign design trends. Already in the 1930s, Hong Kong design revealed strong echoes of the Shanghai modern style that was particularly evident in print culture.[8] In common with Shanghai, the colony was a major center for the production of the popular calendar posters. But the lack of appropriate art or design education in Hong Kong prevailed against design development, as Siu[9] and also Turner have noted: "… by the 1960s, the designs of the early modern period of Hong Kong had begun to disappear as American markets and styles came to predominate."[10]

In the late 1960s, significant change began to occur, but it is hardly surprising that the impetus came from outside. One of the key instigators of a new form of graphic design was American Henry Steiner. Born in Vienna and raised and educated in New York, Steiner
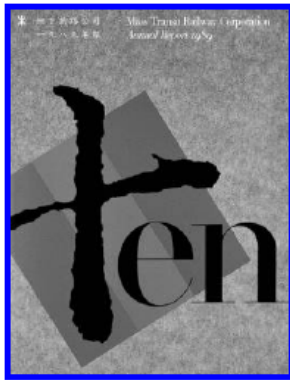
Figure 1
Henry Steiner, annual report for the
Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway's tenth
anniversary, 1989, where the Chinese
character for the number ten performs a
double role. Reproduced with the permission
of Henry Steiner.

moved to Hong Kong in 1961 and founded Graphic Communication Ltd. (now Steiner & Co) in 1964. He is generally attributed as the most influential of the overseas designers who began to arrive in Hong Kong in the 1960s.[11] Steiner states that, in Hong Kong, he discovered a "cross-cultural city-state undergoing the transformation from provincial outpost of an empire to international focal-point."[12] His response was to develop a method of "cross-cultural design" that incorporated Chinese cultural symbols and written characters into the Western grid. His visual language is based on contrast and double meanings in text and image via "code-mixing" where, for example, Roman letters of the alphabet are replaced with Chinese characters. (Figure 1)

Steiner's declared intention was to *transform* a new visual language, inspired by but distinct from the combining, mixing, and blending of characters, images, and icons which he saw going on in local design. The latter he describes as being akin to "yin-yang," the unique and popular drink available on Hong Kong street stands that combines tea and coffee (to produce a taste that Steiner describes as enhancing the worst characteristics of both beverages).[13] Visually and ideologically, his metaphor was the Yin Yang symbol, where the elements never merge but remain discrete yet complementary. His cross-cultural design process has three stages of evolution:

1. Quotation – where foreign images are used for their quaintly exotic flavor as decoration. (He notes how this stage is a form of appropriation precariously close to plagiarism; employing icons without necessarily understanding them.)

2. Mimicry – which involves working in the style or manner of an artist or school in attempt at understanding to some degree how and why the model was done. (The thrust is more towards re-creation than reproduction. An operative adjective is *influence*.)

3. Transformation – where the influence has been assimilated and the once foreign becomes personal and natural.[14]

Steiner demonstrated transformation through the device of bifurcation, where a symbol or icon from Chinese culture was paired with an equivalent "echo" from Western culture. For the 1980 annual report of the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation, "The Pearl of the Orient" was combined with the "Big Apple" in a symbolic and a visual pairing based on the circle. (Figure 2) The same publication likewise matched or "rhymed" scenes from Hong Kong and New York, such as the head of the Statue of Liberty with a Chinese opera character, to symbolize the bank's acquisition of the New York-based Marine Midland Bank. (Figure 3) Steiner attempted to address a major problem of self-representation or quasi-branding for his key clients, who were largely international/colonial companies, "working in or communicating to a foreign culture."[15] It is not surprising therefore that the designs he produced very

Figure 2 (left)
Henry Steiner, cover of the annual report for the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation, 1980. Reproduced with the permission of Henry Steiner.
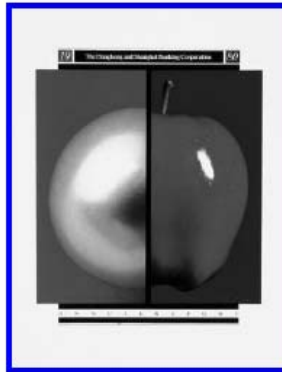
Figure 3 (right)
Henry Steiner, an inside page of the annual report for the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation, 1980. Reproduced with the permission of Henry Steiner.

often employed the most basic cultural stereotypes and Orientalist tropes. While Steiner did achieve a form of transformation, it did not result in hybridity: the original image and the metaphor were always evident (for example, the pearl and the apple). Cross-cultural design for Steiner and others[16] implied a biculturalism, where both cultures are clearly represented through known typologies; and assumed an approach to design, where Western forms and images equal global, and traditional and stereotyped signifiers equal local. In this approach, Hong Kong/local equates with tradition and China.

Two other graphic designers who are considered pioneers in Hong Kong are Kan Tai Keung and Alan Chan, who each came to prominence in the 1980s. Both conceived distinctive transformations of Chinese characters and images, first into graphics and then into products in the 1990s. Their different points of departure from Steiner are evident in their graphic styles and imagery. Kan, for example, is a practitioner of Chinese brush painting; and Chan a collector of Chinese antiques. Both are well-respected designers in Japan, mainland China, and Taiwan.[17] In comparing their approaches in his doctoral thesis, Daniel Huppatz describes Steiner's style as "neocolonialist," Kan's as "Chinese postmodernism," and Chan's as "retro."[18] A series of posters based on Kan's practice of shuimo Chinese brush painting indicate clearly that his approach derives from Chinese culture and tradition; not as a form of representation, but as an understanding and assimilation that is then translated for contemporary audiences in its technique and use of "empty" space. (Figure 4) The style does, without doubt, place Asian visual culture as a point of departure for global design.

> Chinese culture does not only belong to China, but to the whole world. Culture lies in thought and not in form: the form is merely a vehicle. If you use a modernized, global language as a means of expression, people will understand, although not necessarily with a deep understanding of the culture.[19]

Figure 4
Kan Tai-Keung, Shui Mo poster, exhibited at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, 1985. Reproduced with the permission of Kan Tai-keung.

For Huppatz, it is Chan's work that "represents the best case for a local design style, fundamentally connected to global capitalism, in both historical references and its consumption" by virtue of drawing upon local/Hong Kong historical references.[20] Chan remains true to historical references and cultural signifiers. His designs for the Mandarin Oriental cake shop and The Optical Shop, for example, effectively revive old vernacular forms and images, but do not seek to transform them. There is always a dance between the aesthetic and the commercial, as Chan has commented:

> Melding East and West cannot be a blind pursuit. In so doing, I must also consider a client's needs. I hope to give every Chinese something to be proud of through my designs, and to give our best to others in the process.[21]

Chan's employment of nostalgia in the creation of consumer products and graphics reflects a global design genre in the 1990s that had particular resonance for Hong Kong design. As Appadurai has argued:

> Rummaging through history has become a standard technique of advertising, especially of visual and electronic ads, as a way to draw on the genuine nostalgia of age-groups for pasts they actually know through other experiences, but also as a way to underline the inherent ephemerality of the present.[22]

What more appropriate way for Hong Kong to be addressed than through styles that "underline the inherent ephemerality" of its present, highlighted in the decade of its change of sovereignty? Nostalgia (for China) is a key theme uniting the two luxury brands that will be discussed next: Vivienne Tam and Shanghai Tang.

Hong Kong Image and Branding
VIVIENNE TAM

The upmarket fashion brand Vivienne Tam developed a substantial international business in the 1990s. Named after its designer, the label became associated with designs that drew liberally on Chinese and Asian cultural references and on exoticism. Tam was born in Canton and educated in Hong Kong, but her business always has been based in New York, where she moved in the 1980s, although her manufacturing base is in southern China. Her international success began in the mid-1990s following the development in 1993 of her "signature" Chinese-inspired designs. Her most visually distinctive and best-publicized garments were the Mao collection for spring/summer 1995, (Figure 5) and her Buddha and Kuan Yin (the Buddhist goddess of mercy) printed dresses for spring 1997.[23]

Tam has used what Steiner refers to as "quotation" in her work as a very self-conscious design strategy. When the cultural references are clearly derivative their translation has included

parodies, such as the t-shirt featuring the image of Mao with pigtails
or with a bee sitting on his nose. (See Figure 5) She has assimilated
references from Chinese culture and combined them with prevailing
modern Western shapes, which make garments desirable in Hong
Kong and in the global marketplace. (The Kuan Yin dress, printed
on netting, for example, was one of her best-selling pieces ever.)
Tam's design hybridity has become very successful commercially.
The brand is stocked in more than a hundred retail outlets across
the United States, including the flagship store in Manhattan, as
well as at seven boutiques in Hong Kong, one in Shanghai, stores in
Japan, plus licensing and distribution agreements. Her international
following can be described as global, extending as it does to Europe,
Canada, Brazil, Indonesia, Taiwan, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Singapore,
Puerto Rico, and the Philippines; and including movie stars and
celebrities.[24]

Nostalgia for her Chinese roots was endorsed in her 2000
publication *China Chic,* a richly illustrated and colorful coffee-table
book that induces the reader to share Tam's fascination with Chinese
history and culture. Tam's exoticized "signature," which resonates
with Hong Kong's search for identity, emerged at a time when global
fashion and style also were looking to Asia for references. The late
Richard Martin, curator at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan
Museum in New York, described Tam as being in possession of
an "idealistic globalism that transcends politics and offers a more

enchanted, peaceful world."[25] Tam continues to be invested in Chinese culture and to employ cultural references in her work, although the self-exoticization has become subtler. According to Lise Skov, self-exoticization may have been the only design strategy that Tam could employ to create a commercially successful brand. In conversations with younger Hong Kong-based fashion designers in the 1990s, Skov noted that:

> There was general agreement that the way to realize ambitions in international fashion was to "do something Chinese." For them, this was the only conceivable way to turn their distance from the fashion centers into a competitive edge that could be exploited in the international marketplace. Rather than emphasizing Hong Kong's technical expertise in the manufacturing of street fashion, for example, ambitious designers felt pressured to buy into an old Orientalism strangely at odds with the culturally neutral modernism that otherwise counts as good fashion in Asia.[26]

So design sits, increasingly awkwardly, not just at the interface of the local and the global, but also alongside technique, culture, and commerce. How much then was nostalgia and Orientalism a conscious choice for Tam or, following Skov's argument, the only choice? To look further into this question I consider two other Hong Kong brands, Shanghai Tang and then G.O.D.

SHANGHAI TANG

Launched in 1994 by entrepreneur David Tang Wing-Cheung with a shop in central Hong Kong, Shanghai Tang began with aspirations to become a global brand. Today, just over a decade later, under the ownership of the French luxury goods company Richemont, it has emerged from some uncertain early years as a distinctive label internationally "… as the first global luxury Chinese brand."[27] Tang's ambition was to interweave traditional Chinese cultural elements with contemporary, twentieth-century style. The image of the Hong Kong flagship store and its later offshoots mimic the interior of the 1930s style China Club, the exclusive private club opened by David Tang in Hong Kong in 1991. A wealthy businessman, importer of Cuban cigars, co-owner of the Hanart TZ art gallery, friend of celebrities and socialites, Hong Kong born, British public school educated Tang is a flamboyant personality very much at home socially and commercially in both Chinese and Western cultural contexts, and able to politically toe the line of both. His self-style has been compared to that of the nineteenth-century comprador, well-versed in both cultures.[28]

Shanghai Tang's image is both nostalgic and retro, referencing emotional longing for the past tinged with contemporary cynicism and detachment. The use of nostalgia and retro in this way in the

Figure 6 (above left)
Shanghai Tang's original logo, declaring that the merchandise was "Made by Chinese." Reproduced with the permission of Shanghai Tang.

Figure 7 (above right)
Shanghai Tang, waving Mao and Deng watches, late 1990s. Reproduced with the permission of Shanghai Tang.

retail sector parallels similar global brands, such as the British Paul Smith and American Ralph Lauren (both named after their founders in the same way Shanghai Tang plays on David Tang's name). Like the original Paul Smith and Ralph Lauren stores in London and New York, respectively, located in "historic" buildings, Shanghai Tang's flagship is in one of the few older buildings in central Hong Kong, the 1920s Pedder Building. The style of the retail interior acts as a theatrical backdrop to merchandise that originally declared on the label it was "Made by Chinese (Figure 6). Featuring clothing, gifts, and interior accessories, the designs reinvented utilitarian Chinese clothing and artifacts in expensive materials and bright colors such as gold, hot pink, lime green, and blazing red. Gifts and novelties were staple items, which parodied Chinese cultural signifiers and icons, for example, wristwatches depicting either Mao Tse-tung or Deng Xiao-ping with one arm waving back and forth to the movement of the watch (Figure 7).

The visual key to the brand image was 1930s Shanghai at the height of its internationalism and trading power, presented as the nostalgic other of Hong Kong.[29]

Added were references from the Qing dynasty, the Maoist period, and contemporary Chinese pop art. The self-Orientalization that imbued the flagship store and its merchandise was intended to attract domestic and foreign consumers, especially from cultures that have a long association with the Orient either through political domination or cultural contact. (From its outset, the Hong Kong store appealed mostly to Japanese and European tourists, and to expatriates.)[30] One of the only authentic aspects of the brand was its Imperial Tailor department that custom-made garments according to tailoring traditions established in Hong Kong in the 1930s by Shanghai tailors from the mainland after the Japanese invasion.

Reinforcing his global ambitions, David Tang opened a second store in November 1997 in New York on Madison Avenue in Manhattan. It received a blaze of publicity, but by the end of the

decade the store had moved to smaller premises further north on Madison Avenue (and in 2008 it moved again on Madison Avenue to a midtown location). The downturn in the global economy had made commercial speculation inadvisable, but also the company's lack of initial investment in design no doubt affected Tang's expansionist plans. Many of the original products were "outsourced," and bought in by merchandisers, rather than being designed in-house or specially for the company. Thus, by the end of the 1990s, the items for sale were beginning to look tired and dull and in need of revitalization in keeping with the pace of global fashion trends. (While Shanghai Tang was not a fashion brand dedicated only to clothes, as say Vivienne Tam, it certainly could not stand outside of the fashion system.)

As Shanghai Tang accepted that it was indeed in the fashion business, more designers were brought into the company including graduates from London's prestigious Central St Martin's School of Fashion Design. In October 2001, the company appointed Cesar Gaupo from the Philippines as its chief fashion designer. While well-known in his native country, Gaupo was little known outside. His work has been described as "…'unicasual' fashion—free-flowing, carefree clothing that also looks good at glamorous functions…. His silhouettes articulate Manilan sensibilities."[31] Gaupo moved to Hong Kong and regularly visited the Shanghai Tang stores (by now in London and Singapore, as well as in New York). He led the design expansion into more classic garment shapes. But the overall image continued to play in its Orientalism on mythic, cinematic images of China, such as the "Kung Fu" line, as well as on Western classics including the men's "Cotton-pique stand collar, short-sleeve polo with contrasting 'Double Happiness' embroidery on the back yoke and button panel" for summer 2005.[32]

The design identity rested somewhere between Steiner's categories of quotation and mimicry. It did not aim to achieve transformation through design in its early years. The design adaptations aimed at repackaging Chinese history and tradition. Ultimately, the economic strategy was to attract consumers in mainland China, once commercial success has been achieved elsewhere, as David Tang commented:

> My vision was always that, having established a foothold in the West and having established Shanghai Tang as a global brand, we should always go back to the mainland, as we Chinese say, "having been soaked in salt water." Even if you take the whole of Western Europe and North America, you are only taking about 500 to 600 million people, whereas China alone has 1.4 billion. And there's no reason why mainland Chinese should not be wearing more Chinese clothes.[33]

While this discussion has centered on the 1990s, it should be noted that Shanghai Tang has undergone substantial design development

since then, still focusing on the assimilation of Chinese and Western identities into merchandise and brand image that has market currency and appeal (www.shanghaitang.com).

G.O.D. ("Goods of Desire")

Unlike Vivienne Tam and Shanghai Tang, the Hong Kong brand G.O.D. has not relied on self-exoticization or nostalgia, but has developed a design strategy based on local immaterial cultural practices and material vernacular objects. If Shanghai Tang can be compared to Ralph Lauren, then G.O.D. might be described as analogous to a Chinese IKEA.

Established in 1996 and cofounded by Hong Kong born, British educated architect Douglas Young, G.O.D. sells interior and lifestyle products that reference practices and vernacular objects common to Hong Kong. The brand name G.O.D. is derived from and is pronounced according to the phonetic sound of the Cantonese slang "live better" (*gee ho dee*), with a double entendre that plays on the biculturalism of Hong Kong (also translated as "Goods of Desire"). The brand's original mission was "To define a new Asian identity" for the local community and, ultimately, for a wider market. Young has declared "that by 'living better,' he doesn't want the residents of Hong Kong to simply buy G.O.D. products, but to build a greater sense of identity and culture together."[34] In 1999, the company mission was stated as:

> To improve living standards
> To be a Hong Kong-based world brand
> To define a hip Hong Kong/Asian identity.[35]

Following the precedent set by IKEA in Hong Kong, the first G.O.D. store was in a warehouse on the outskirts of town. It currently has three shops located in the antique district of Hollywood Road and the busy shopping districts of Tsim Sha Tsui and Causeway Bay. (Figure 8) The merchandise is characterized not by looking Chinese—that is, by reproducing stereotyped cultural signifiers—but by referencing local artefacts and everyday ways of doing things in Hong Kong.

The culture of the company is predicated on the global emergence of an Asian lifestyle, distinct from a Western lifestyle, as "a significant cultural presence in the world" of the twenty-first century:

> G.O.D. is a dialogue between East and West, for the most part of the twentieth century Asia has been under Western influence, G.O.D. now provides a credible counterpoint. Because our climate, diet, living space, and culture are all different from our Western counterparts, it is not surprising that the way we live is different too. With the emergence of Asia as a significant cultural presence in the world, we rise up to the challenge of defining a new Asian identity.[36]

For instance, a simple folding stool reflects the need for occasional pieces of furniture in the territory's cramped living spaces, but is equally appropriate to a small home anywhere. A folding Mahjong table was an innovative design created to accommodate a popular local pastime and small interiors that demand spatial flexibility. Dishes and cooking utensils reproduced those used traditionally in Hong Kong. Most of the products are designed in-house by a design team led by Douglas Young, or outsourced from mainland China and Asia. But while the merchandise derives from Hong Kong culture and lifestyle, it is targeted at a wider market, where it is already gaining success. One Hong Kong journalist noted:

> In many ways, G.O.D., Shanghai Tang, and Alan Chan are similar. All three profess a desire to build a Hong Kong brand, and all have gone international. So what makes G.O.D. different?[37]

Peter Smyth, strategic planning director at BBDO Hong Kong, says G.O.D. is closer to building a true "Hong Kong style" than any other brand. He thinks G.O.D. is one of the rare stores where both the local and expatriate communities feel at home on a regular basis. According to Smyth, G.O.D. has managed to tap into the two communities' shared love for the city's energy and possibilities, achieving what he calls a true "fusion of styles."[38]

Douglas Young's design concept stemmed from an insider's understanding of local culture, which enabled him to know and appreciate subtle distinctions that would remain obscure to the outsider. He mentions, for example, that "'the Pearl of the Orient' is [sic] Hong Kong's popular moniker up till the 1970s. In Cantonese, it sounds exactly like 'Eastern Spider'"[39] Young's designs indicate that he understands exactly what Abbas intended by Hong Kong's "culture of disappearance." He had t-shirts and other merchandise printed with Chinese characters taken directly from classified advertisements in local newspapers, where "the adult section features ambiguous words that allude to, but always stop short of outright lewdness."[40] The simple cloth "Bao Fook" bag was reinterpreted as a reversible accessory. Flip-flops, typically worn

at the beach or at the local wet market, were printed with Chinese characters or other motifs based on the facades of the densely populated area of Yaumatei. The latter also was printed on tote bags, a design which won an award at the Hong Kong Business of Design Week in December 2004. (Figure 9) The same print also has been used to upholster furniture, and on dressing gowns, slippers, visors, and flip-flops. Another print was based on the brightly-painted metal letterboxes that hang on the walls on common lobby areas or on the outside of older buildings in Hong Kong, and are subject to individualization by the owners. The "Live Chicken Tote-bag" (Figure 10) was designed around a practice that predates supermarket shopping in Hong Kong—the taking of a live chicken from the market in a bag as a gift when visiting someone's home. Quirky yes, humorous yes, reflective of local Hong Kong culture, yes; but also marketable beyond the territory.

G.O.D.'s design strategy has been credited in Hong Kong for its commercial success. In December 2004, the company won an award as one of the Top Ten Hong Kong Brand Names from the Chinese Manufacturers Association of Hong Kong. It was profiled as an example of Hong Kong design that embodies vernacular culture in *Designed in Hong Kong*, sponsored by the Hong Kong Trade Development Council and the Hong Kong Design Centre (2004); and Douglas Young was featured as a design entrepreneur in a similar publication, *Very Hong Kong* (2007).[41] G.O.D. products are now exported to cities across the globe including New York, London, Sydney, and Singapore; and to department stores throughout Europe minus the brand name.

The success of G.O.D. indicates that self-exoticization and East meets West stereotypes are not the only creative strategies for developing a local Hong Kong-based design identity for a wider global market. G.O.D. attempts a creative translation of the vernacular; of the tangible and intangible, humble and everyday in Hong Kong; as opposed to the cultural references of Vivienne Tam or Shanghai Tang, which draw more on familiar Chinese cultural

signifiers. The success of their hybrid design is in enabling cultural references to be evocative to the local consumer, yet also universal enough to be interesting to a global market.

G.O.D.'s brand name does not play on nostalgia or on signifiers of Chineseness for their own sake. The name is well-chosen to resonate commercially in its ambiguity with established global brands such as IKEA, SONY, NIKE, and HSBC—names that only have meanings as brands (and are always capitalized), but which convey and represent an association with a local cultural identity translated for a global context as products and images that employ complex design strategies. What G.O.D. is showing is that nostalgia and Orientalism are not the only choices for a local Hong Kong-based design identity. G.O.D.'s relative success indicates, on the contrary, that the local and vernacular offer an approach that goes beyond representation and that recognizes Hong Kong's "culture of disappearance." The appeal of this approach reflects the development of a new subjectivity in Hong Kong design.

A New Subjectivity in Hong Kong Design

When Ackbar Abbas (1997) emphasized that the old cultural binarisms of "East meets West," "tradition" and "modernity" were not sufficient to establish a postcolonial identity for Hong Kong, his rationale was: "If for no other reason because the local and the global are becoming more and more intimately imbricated with each other."[42] Abbas developed the argument that what Hong Kong required above all, culturally and politically, was the creation of "a new Hong Kong subjectivity"; that is a subjectivity constructed not narcissistically but in the very process of negotiating the mutations and permutations of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism.[43] Without this, Abbas forecasted the perpetuation of the predictable "Western images of Hong Kong this and that."[44] This subjectivity could emerge by the old imperialist cultural bearings giving way to the emergence of the newly decolonized "space of disappearance," where the former colonial city preempts the global city of the future. The negotiation of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism indicates the complex challenges, but also the opportunities for Hong Kong-based design.

Abbas referred to three examples of creative practice: Hong Kong film, architecture, and writing; but many of his comments apply equally to design. He emphasized "the slippery nature of Hong Kong's cultural space,"[45] and how the continued representation of Hong Kong by the old East meets West binarism could result in Hong Kong disappearing as a subject. The new Hong Kong cinema took the urban situation as its subject; a place with ad hoc structures and problematic hyper density, already threatened by disappearance. In contrast, contemporary Hong Kong architecture presented "false images of power" (that echo global postmodern architecture) that ignore, and thus undermine, the vernacular.[46]

A new image or identity would be a hybrid, or to be more exact, a form of "hyphenation"; not a simple representation of things past, but more a recognition of a cultural condition locally that resonates with the complexity of the global. If we apply Abbas's words to design, it is self-evident that some practices are more concerned with the ephemeral, such as graphic communication, advertising, and fashion, and thus more subject to current market trends and client or consumer demands. Designs intended for greater longevity can be expected to have greater potential for a new subjectivity and the imbrication of the local and the global. The Asian Lifestyle Design lab at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, led by product designer and teacher Benny Ding Leong, for instance, "provides research services to and generates critical knowledge for designers and industries creating innovative, sustainable products and services for the Asian lifestyle." Their annual workshop encourages international and multidisciplinary design collaborations that investigate tangible and intangible culture as a means towards "new design solutions for sustainable product development in indigenous communities."[47]

In his own practice, Benny Leong has focused in recent years on establishing new design subjectivity for Hong Kong and greater China.[48] His method involves detailed understanding of Chinese history and culture; particularly ways of thinking and doing, and of transmitting culture into an objective design system. He designs from what he refers to as cultural-based knowledge and values. Confucian and Taoist principles and Buddhist aesthetics all impact his thinking. What is interesting, especially in the context of some of the examples discussed above, is that Leong's work does not reflect Chinese or Oriental stereotypes in its appearance. In fact, many of his pieces are electronic devices designed to resonate with social context, for example, by retaining family values and preserving memories through communication devices. "Gather," a responsive music player, for instance, is based on yin principles of passivity to bring the soothing qualities of music to the environment. Leong's designs are not simply *transformed* from source, but are generated from principles and ideas that attempt to address contemporary ethical dilemmas, rather than being predicated on the visual. Benny Leong's work is a powerful example of the possibilities of the emergence of a new subjectivity in design. But many of his pieces have remained in the prototype stage. Engaging the market is design's challenge, but not its only one. The new subjectivity can engage design beyond solely market-driven concerns. Design activism also has become evident in Hong Kong in the decade since the handover, usually as a means of protesting against the force of urban development.

One activist unit is the Community Museum Project, a small collective founded in 2002 that takes the concept of the museum as a method to represent the everyday life and values of Hong Kong. Its numerous projects have included a panoramic photographic

documentation of Lee Tung Street (the "wedding card" street), the location of many small print shops in the Wanchai district, before its demolition in 2005. Two years later, the group documented the work of crafts people located in Sham Shui Po, another area confronted with urban development. Makers of wooden carts, rattan furniture, and metal work; and seamstress and knitters; also were paired with younger designers to create new objects that were then exhibited to the public in two apartment blocks in the soon to be demolished Shek Kip Mei Estate.[49] Their work has provided new applications of design in Hong Kong, beyond the market, which also adds a further stage to Steiner's cross-cultural design process where local subjectivities reference the "culture and politics of disappearance" identified by Ackbar Abbas. As a model, it can be applied beyond Hong Kong. Some scholars have offered the view that the colonial city and Hong Kong, in particular, offer signposts to the future.

Anthony King has described colonial cities as "forerunners of what the contemporary capitalist world city would become."[50] Tony Fry's more specific view is that the paradoxes and juxtapositions of Hong Kong offer it a particular and valuable opportunity:

> … historically, architectural, industrial, graphic, fashion, furniture, and other design practices in the territory all exist in an identifiable condition of auto-negation—the place has never been able to be simply local. The authentic inauthenticity of Hong Kong, its unsituated situatedness, actually is more than just a part of the global fascination with the place—it is its design opportunity.'[51]

Parallels can be drawn with the development of critical regionalism in architectural practice where, as Kenneth Frampton notes, a local cultural strategy can have a universal impact. In the 1950s, Californian architect H. H. Harris called this a "Regionalism of Liberation," in tune with the emerging thoughts of the time:

> We call such a manifestation "regional" only because it has not emerged elsewhere…. A region may develop ideas. A region may accept ideas. Imagination and intelligence are necessary for both. In California in the late Twenties and Thirties, modern European ideas met a still-developing regionalism. In New England, on the other hand, European modernism met a rigid and restrictive regionalism that at first resisted and then surrendered. New England accepted European modernism whole because its own regionalism had been reduced in a collection of restrictions.[52]

In the years since Hong Kong became part of China, the economy and manufacturing capacity of the mainland has continued to develop at high speed but, at the same time, in Hong Kong a cultural subjectivity has been unfolding through commercial and noncommercial design. In parallel, the reality and complexity of how we

might define the "global" and the "local" also has changed. Hong Kong then, founded on the simultaneous existence of "two cultures," a place where the local and the global are embedded historically, also offers an example and even exemplars of the possibilities and challenges for the future roles of design.

Acknowledgments

1   Matthew Turner, *Made in Hong Kong: A History of Export Design in Hong Kong 1900–1960* (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1988), 7.

2   "Post-colonial" needs qualification; for Hong Kong did not achieve independence, as did other former colonies, but was "reunited" with a China from which it had become increasingly separated, culturally and politically, during the twentieth century. Ackbar Abbas also points out that, for Hong Kong, colonialism "is less an explanatory term than a term that needs explaining." See Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 2.

3   Ibid., 7.

4   Wendy Wong Siuyi, "Detachment and Unification: A Chinese Graphic Design History in Greater China since 1979," *Design Issues* 17:4 (Autumn 2001): 57.

5   Matthew Turner, "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong," *Design Issues* 6:1 (Fall 1989): 82.

6   Jonathan S. Grant, "Cultural Formation in Postwar Hong Kong" in Lee Pui-tak, *Hong Kong Reintegrating with China: Political, Cultural, and Social Dimensions* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), 165, references Matthew Turner, "Ersatz Design: Interactions between Chinese and Western Design in Hong Kong, 1950s–1960s" (Unpublished PhD thesis, London: Royal College of Art, 1993).

7   *Made by Hong Kong*, Suzanne Berger and Richard K. Lester, eds. (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997), 111.

8   Leo Lee Ou-Fan, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

9   Siu King Chung, "Redeveloping Design Education in Hong Kong?" in Hazel Clark, ed., *Design Issues* 19:3 (Summer 2003): 83–93.

10 Matthew Turner, "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong," *Design Issues* 6:1 (Fall 1989): 91.

11 Wendy Wong Siuyi, "Detachment and Unification: A Chinese Graphic Design History in Greater China since 1979": 53.

12 Henry Steiner and Ken Haas, *Cross-cultural Design Communicating in the Global Marketplace* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 6.

13 Ibid., 9.

14 Ibid., 2.

15 Ibid.

16 In their book, Steiner and Haas provide "a cross-cultural anthology" of designers from different parts of the globe who also have employed the technique.

17 Wendy Wong Siuyi, "Detachment and Unification: A Chinese Graphic Design History in Greater China since 1979."

18 Daniel J. Huppatz, "Hong Kong Design: Culture Meets Commerce" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, 2003): 113.

19 Kan Tai-keung in *Designed in Hong Kong*, John Heskett, ed. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Design Council, 2004), 29.

20 Daniel J. Huppatz, "Hong Kong Design: Culture Meets Commerce": 113.

21 Alan Chan in *Designed in Hong Kong*, John Heskett, ed., 45.

22 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 78.

23 The Mao print dress is in the collection of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh and the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. The Kuan Yin dress also is in the FIT collection. (www.viviennetam.com)

24 www.viviennetam.com

25 Ibid.

26 Lise Skov, "Fashion-Nation: A Japanese Globalization Experience and a Hong Kong Dilemma" in *Re-orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress*, S. Niessen, A. M. Leshkowich, and C. Jones, eds. (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), 215–16.

27 *China Daily* (Hong Kong edition), (July 7, 2004): 16.

28 Huppatz refers to Yen-P'ing Hao to support his description of David Tang as a twentieth-century version of the nineteenth-century comprador: "As a bicultural middleman, the comprador in many ways exemplified the hybrid treaty port culture. Having professionally constant and intimate association with Westerners, he was easily exposed to Western influences. These influences ranged from his style of life to his intellectual outlook. But he was likewise certainly affected by Chinese culture in which he had been raised. Thus, although affected by both Chinese and Western elements, he was dominated by neither. He embodied both, but through a process of adjustment and modifications." Yen-P'ing Hao, *The Comprador in Nineteenth-Century China: Bridge between East and West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); 220 in Daniel J. Huppatz, "Hong Kong Design: Culture Meets Commerce."

29 Lee observes how an increasing nostalgia for "old Shanghai" became evident in Hong Kong in "a welter of consumer goods" in the 1980s, including reissues of old Shanghai songs, popular television drama series, and "old Shanghai-style" clothes. In the 1990s, in my experience, 1930s Shanghai also provided the design inspiration for theme restaurants. Lee cites Daisy Ng's interpretation of the popular image of old Shanghai as an obvious analogy to Hong Kong, and adds his own opinion that Hong Kong was in addition inscribing its own pre-handover anxieties onto a Shanghai of the past. Leo Lee Ou-Fan, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*: 332–3.

30 Hazel Clark, *The Cheongsam* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press: Images of Asia, 2000), 61.

31 Douglas Bullis, *Fashion Asia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 10.

32 www.shanghaitang.com

33 *China Daily* (Hong Kong edition): 16.

34 Adeline Chong, "Behind the Brand: The Triumphs and Tragedies: G.O.D. Divine," www.brandchannel.com (accessed September 20, 2004).

35 G.O.D. Press Release, 1999.

36 Ibid.

37 Adeline Chong, "Behind the Brand: The Triumphs and Tragedies: G.O.D. Divine."

38 Ibid.

39 Douglas Young, "Hong Kong Special Cultural Region (dress code)," Hong Kong, G.O.D. Ltd, 2003 (unpaginated).

40 Ibid.

41 *Designed in Hong Kong*, John Heskett, ed. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Design Council, 2004) and *Very Hong Kong, Design 1997–2007*, John Heskett, ed. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Design Centre, 2007), 162–63.

42 Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, 11.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 20.

46 Ibid., 89.

47 www.polyu.edu.hk/web/Research/AsianLifestyle (accessed August 5, 2008).

48 Benny Leong and Hazel Clark, "Culture-based Knowledge: Towards New Design Thinking and Practice—A Dialogue" in Hazel Clark, ed., *Design Issues* 19:3 (Summer 2003): 51.

49 www.hkcmp.org (accessed August 5, 2008).

50 Anthony King, *Global Cities* (London: Routledge, 1990), 3.

51 Tony Fry, "The 'Futurings' of Hong Kong" in Hazel Clark, ed., *Design Issues* 19:3 (Summer 2003): 72.

52 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 22.